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US POLICY ON VIETNAM AFTER 1968

1. The task of the new U.S. Administration to plan and implement its policy on Vietnam has two aspects: (1) the selection of a preferred policy, (2) the setting up of a process to carry out this policy and adjust it to changing circumstances and new information. RAND might be able to offer some advice on both. Indeed, to be realistic, the choice of a preferred policy should not be divorced from its institutional and bureaucratic implementation.

2. From the point of view of policy planning, the old Administration -- and the country -- came to grief in Vietnam because (1) attempts to terminate the war were improvised instead of making termination the central focus of policy; and (2) successive policies failed to provide for uncertainties. In the past, it might have seemed reasonable to expect at each stage that a certain change in strategy or tactics would bring success -- but it was unreasonable not to make provision for possible failure.

3. Thus, the new Administration ought to have a contingency plan for war termination. This would be a broad scheme that subordinates all the U.S. efforts for Vietnam (Paris negotiations, pacification, attacks on VC infrastructure, bombing, population protection, etc.) to a policy for termination; but does so by allowing for uncertainty, i.e. by meshing together fallback positions and alternative policies for the event that some of the anticipated results fail to materialize. Moreover, the contingency plan ~~might~~ should take account of the institutional

realities of the U.S. Government, MACV, and the Services.

4. The time sequence in such a contingency plan is important. It would be unrealistic to expect it to emerge full-blown by January 20, and -- as said above -- it must be adaptable to new information. The new Administration will have an enormous mass of information at its disposal. What data should be pulled in first, which study groups should be commissioned immediately, which decisions can wait for later?

5. Given the limited information now available at RAND, it seems the Contingency Plan should provide for two broad alternatives: (1) war termination materializes within the first four to six months in 1969; (2) termination takes longer.

Termination Within the Short Run (January-June 1969)

6. For the short run, our options for terminating the war are, of course, rather limited. Most changes in our military operations would take months for full effect, and even the most optimistic predictions would not anticipate an impact on the enemy's bargaining position within this period. The same holds true for all the other programs in the field: reform of the GVN, pacification, etc. Hence, the only variable under U.S. control for the short range would be a new U.S. negotiating position -- or rather, a negotiating position where there was none.

7. In our ignorance about the content of recent talks with Hanoi, we can only guess at the opportunities for changes in the U.S. negotiating position. One possibility for termination in the short run would be a U.S.-Hanoi agreement for a withdrawal of U.S. forces in exchange for a partial withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces and a reduction in NVA attacks, without any political arrangements.* Even without a cease-fire, if the withdrawal was rapid and undisturbed by the VC and NVA, this would be tantamount to war-termination in Vietnam as far as the United States is concerned.**

8. This possibility raises a number of critical questions:

(1) Is this kind of termination desirable, even if the GVN collapsed from the shock of the sudden abandonment.

(2) If not, might the GVN survive for one year, for three years? Would it transform itself?

(3) Should continued U.S. materiél support to ARVN be permitted by the agreement?

(4) What could (should) be done if the NVA came in again to help the VC finish off the GVN-ARVN?

*This was advocated by Secretary of Defense Clifford on TV in "Face the Nation", Dec. 12. Clifford left ambiguous whether the NVA withdrawal would have to be nearly total and whether a cease-fire would be merely a desirable or a necessary condition.

**By "termination within the short range," I do not mean a truce or peace treaty would necessarily be signed within this period, but that a settlement would have clearly emerged with only details left open.

(5) What additional moves would be advisable in Laos, Thailand, etc.

And many other questions would come to mind. Some of them could be usefully examined by RAND. Some -- particularly the first question regarding the desirability -- could be answered only after an exploration of the possibilities for war termination in the longer term.

Termination After the Spring of 1969

9. The next period to be considered begins somewhere after next spring, when new strategies in the field could start showing an effect, and ends three years later, when a continuing war in Vietnam would become the key issue in the Presidential elections. Three years is a long time for the American public to continue this war; but for the Vietnamese Communists who have come this far after twenty years of almost uninterrupted fighting, three years may seem short -- a short time to hold out for the maximum.

10. Termination during this three year period would thus become necessary in lieu of faster termination if any one of the following conditions obtained:

(1) An agreement on "mutual withdrawal" would not be reached because:

(a) the risk of a GVN collapse or defeat was judged to be too high by the President and the consequences too damaging to go the "Clifford route." (A likely possibility)

(b) the indicators reported by MACV and other sources would be so encouraging that a decision for the "Clifford route" would be judged to be premature. (Also a likely possibility)

(c) Hanoi would make further demands (e.g., no materiel support for GVN-ARVN) before agreeing to mutual withdrawal.

(2) An agreement on "mutual withdrawal" would be reached, but

(a) NVA forces failed to disappear, so that the U.S. withdrawal would have to be stopped and U.S.-NVA fighting resumed again.

(b) Opposition to the scheme in Saigon and/or in Washington would bring the withdrawal to a halt, stimulated perhaps by dramatic developments in South Vietnam (massacres perpetrated by the Communists, patriotic fervor in Saigon, outcrys of betrayal among U.S. military).

11. The contingency plan for war termination within 3 years should fit within the following constraints:

(1) Accommodate a range of evaluations as to how well or how badly we are doing in Vietnam.

(2) Get along without an increase in U.S. forces and preferably permit a substantial decrease during 1969.

(3) Have a fallback option for the event Hanoi fails to cooperate with whatever policy they are supposed to cooperate.

(4) Must not count on Soviet help.

(5) Have options for the event the GVN obstructs U.S. policy.

(6) Must not be without a solution if the political structure of South Vietnam cannot be improved (i.e., if the GVN cannot increase its active support among the population).

(7) Must not be without a solution if new U.S. military tactics (e.g., CAPS, "population strategy," etc.) fail to produce the hoped-for results.

(8) Must not be without a solution if the capabilities of ARVN cannot be increased to the point where ARVN could defeat (or at least stalemate) the VC plus some NVA cadres.

12. It would be presumptuous at this stage to offer a detailed scheme that would meet these constraints. But this kind of contingency planning and weaving together of alternatives in the face of uncertainties is precisely the thing where RAND might make a contribution, more so than in working out the operational details of a specific strategy or in second-guessing the Paris negotiations.

Some First Thoughts on a Three-Year Contingency Plan

13. One idea that may merit further development is to use a threefold approach in Vietnam, territorially separated: build up ARVN to run the Delta, improve U.S. military operations to control the center, and try (partial) extrication in the North. From the point of view of U.S. institutional interests, this would give almost everybody a chance "to put up or shut up." For the Delta, those who wish to make over the GVN and build up ARVN would be given all the support they can reasonable ask for, for the center U.S. forces would be increased (at the expense of the North, permitting an overall reduction), for the North of South Vietnam a mutual withdrawal and various forms of accommodation might be tested.

14. The biggest institutional hurdle to this scheme would be GVN opposition. But this uncertainty could be faced very early (say in the first month of the new Administration) so that it would not violate the principle of contingency planning. For most of the other major uncertainties, this plan could provide alternative escape routes. To put it oversimplified:

(1) If military consolidation of the Center succeeds, the same approach could then be extended to the Delta, leading to termination through partition by giving up part of the North. The more ambitious and successful the military campaign, the smaller that part.

(2) If ARVN and an improved GVN make progress in the Delta, they could be given wider responsibility, leading to termination as under (1).

(3) If neither ARVN nor U.S. military tactics succeed, the arrangements with Hanoi for the I Corps area could then be extended to the whole country. (This option is still fuzzy -- requires more thought.)

15. For the Delta, the following arrangements might be studied: U.S.-GVN would decide on a "quarantine of the Delta," trying to seal off the zone as a recruiting and supply area for the NVA-VC in III Corps by closing completely one arm of the Mekong (probably best done through mining). Only a few well controlled ferries would be permitted to take ARVN supplies in and farm produce (if that must be) out.

16. The Central Area, which might comprise III Corps and part of II Corps, would thus be protected from infiltration from the South. Experiments with barriers might be initiated toward the Cambodian border. The aim of U.S. operations in collaboration with Popular Forces and ARVN would be (1) to prevent infiltration from Cambodia and the Northern part of South Vietnam (unlike North Vietnam, the latter would not be a sanctuary unless infiltration was substantially reduced) and (2) to defeat ("root out") the VC.

17. In the Northern Area, U.S. forces would be reduced (with or without agreement with Hanoi for mutual withdrawal?). The Hue-Danang area might form an enclave where U.S. forces would hold out, until...? (There are still many loose ends in the scheme for the North.)